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ART. IX. — CRITICAL NOTICES.

1. — *Notices of the Press.* — *The Life and Times of John Huss ; or the Bohemian Reformation of the Fifteenth Century.* By the Rev. E. H. GILLETT. Boston : Gould and Lincoln. 16mo. pp. 8.

SHALLOW and ignorant critics have abounded wherever there has been a book-market.

“ If Mævius scribble in Apollo’s spite,
There are who judge still worse than he can write.”

But never has there been such a swarm of bad critics as now infest the literary domain of America. Their numbers are a result of the literary fertility of the country, and of the vast extent of its intellectual semi-cultivation. The annoyance they occasion is in proportion to their number, while the injury they inflict is greater than their feeble natural powers would seem capable of effecting.

Every editor of a newspaper or other periodical either assumes to be a critic by virtue of his position, or keeps one as an attendant on whom the mantle of editorial infallibility descends in ample folds. With readiness proportioned to his ignorance, he is quick to pronounce judgment on the merits of every work that comes under his view. Nothing lies beyond his grasp, or daunts his confidence.

The evil springing from the customary method of book-noticing is in truth a serious one. There is scarcely a journal in America which maintains a correct critical standard, or to which an intelligent man can turn with any assurance of finding in its reviews of new publications either honesty or intelligence of judgment. The fault lies partly with the public, partly with the writers of notices, partly with the publishers. The larger part of our reading public, consisting of persons of imperfect education, of much general and inaccurate information, inappreciative of the value of careful criticism, does not seek or demand it. The critics generally share in the common want of thorough cultivation, and are fully aware that criticism of a high order is not expected of them, and that their errors will be undiscovered, or disregarded. They are for the most part poorly paid, and must write hastily and without due preparation by special study. The publishers, being advertisers whose good-will is to be conciliated, too often make their favor dependent on the skill with which their publications are puffed. Hence the common criticism of new books is characterized by indiscriminate eulogy. The most worthless productions are praised ; just severity of judgment is almost unknown. Nor is this the worst. A practice has lately been adopt-

ed by certain publishers by which a fraud upon the public is attempted, and the character of criticism still further degraded. With the copies of books sent to newspapers or other periodicals is sent also a printed slip, containing a laudatory notice of the work, prepared exclusively for the purpose of forestalling an independent judgment, and of substituting for it an opinion calculated to secure the publisher's profit. This elaborate application of the art of puffing is disgraceful alike to its authors and to such editors as make use of the copy thus supplied to them. And that the number of these is large is obvious from the fact that one of these publishers' puffs may often be found reproduced, with very slight alterations in its form, in many journals, under the guise of an original criticism. Thus the public is misled not only as to the merits of a book, but as to the real opinion of those who profess to pass judgment upon them.

Thus the true function of criticism is degraded, and its power lost. Criticism is one of the noblest portions of the art of literature. Its end is to form and maintain a correct taste, and its methods demand long and careful preparation. The ideal literary critic is one who unites to natural justness of mind quickness of perception, delicacy of feeling, and insight of imagination. His love of truth is not simply an intellectual quality, but has its foundation in moral integrity. His powers have been trained by study of the best products of literature in ancient and modern times; and his opinions, carefully formed, will be held with equal modesty and confidence. His training will have rendered him not only sympathetic with the manifestation of original genius, and genial in its appreciation of all real merit, but also severe in his condemnation of pretension and inaccuracy, of false reasoning, of corrupting thought. Holding a just, and therefore a high, notion of his office as a public instructor, he will qualify himself for special work by faithful study, and make himself able to instruct the learned no less than the ignorant. He will be as conscientious in the bestowal of praise as of blame, and his criticism will have the authority of fairness, frankness, and honesty. Such is the ideal critic. That there is need of critics who shall approach this ideal will not be questioned. M. Vapereau, in the volume for 1864 of his excellent *Année Littéraire*, in speaking of M. Boissonade, a distinguished and admirable critic of the time of the first Napoleon, says, and his words apply with as much force to American as to French criticism: "With such a judge, how far are we from the different sorts of criticism in vogue to-day! Now we have a trenchant and cavalier criticism which imposes its decrees, which insolently develops its improvised opinions upon the subject or the title of a book, in place of reporting the opinions of the author who

is to be judged. . . . Too often the account given of a book is only an act of complaisance, or the satisfaction of an animosity, and truth and justice have little place in the midst of the clouds of incense, or in the pin-pricks or the strokes of the dagger. Boissonade has fixed principles, but he makes no display of them, and they are perceived only in the firmness of his judgment. . . . He has no violent severities, no soft complaisances. He knows how to strike hard without ceasing to strike fair; to praise happily without flattery. In fact, when one sees him employ in the service of criticism this uprightness of character and justness of mind, this taste united with knowledge, this authority without pedantry, this simple and true elegance without labored refinement, this conscience without heaviness, one regrets that these judicial qualities were not exercised upon greater subjects, in a more living and freer literature; but they are therefore not the less estimable, and the man who possessed them not the less worthy of sympathy."

The fault most prevalent in American literature is inaccuracy. It shows itself under various forms,—in looseness of thought, in carelessness of statement, in extravagance of rhetoric, in exaggeration of phrase, and in the display of half-assimilated learning. And in these particulars the common American critic is the worst of sinners.

The prevalence of this fault is not a matter of merely literary concern; it is not of interest alone to men of learning and letters that those who thus dishonor a noble profession should be discredited and brought to shame. It is a matter affecting the national character, and the correction of the fault is a patriotic duty. Inaccuracy in literature is a moral offence. It is one of the most insidious forms of untruthfulness. It makes the progress of truth, and consequently of all that depends on her advance, hard and slow. Many of the worst doctrines inculcated in the name of Christianity are supported by means of inaccurate, that is to say false, literary statement, or argument. Many a dangerous fallacy in politics depends for its existence on the reiteration of inaccurate assertions. Many a scientific error rests on the repetition of inaccurate observations. Half the lifetime of a sincere student is occupied in the search for truth hidden under the rubbish of immemorial lies. The historical investigator is constantly perplexed, delayed, and humiliated by the contradictory inaccuracies of what are called authorities.

And it is this evil which our critics, with their snap judgments and their ignorant pretensions, aggravate and extend. The lover of literature, the lover of his country, who understands that the success of democratic institutions depends on the intellectual and moral training of the people, and that this training is greatly influenced by the character of the books afforded them, must feel that a state of things in

which the office of criticism is so degraded, and in which the few competent critics seem often to have no sense of the responsibility under which they labor, is one which it behooves him to correct by every means within his power. There was never such motive for good and honest work in every field of learning and literature as is supplied by the conditions of this country. Genius is not indeed to be had to order, but the demand for sound, faithful, thorough work may be answered.

We have been led into these reflections by the little pamphlet of which the title stands at the head of this notice. It is a specimen of publishers' advertisements of a special book, made up of the favorable notices of the press. In this case it happens that the book thus advertised is one upon which we have already pronounced judgment. Our readers may remember a notice of Mr. Gillett's *Life of Huss* in our number for January, 1864, in which we showed that the author's preparation was inadequate, and his learning insufficient, for the proper accomplishment of the task he had undertaken; that the book was defaced by mistakes and inaccuracies of statement, and that the style in which it was written was often inelegant and incorrect. We now propose to give Mr. Gillett and his publishers the benefit to be gained by the setting forth of the opinions of other reviewers, contrary, not to our opinion, but to the evidence on which we based our judgment of the work.

Had Mr. Gillett announced his book as a compilation at second hand from authorities easily accessible to the student, it might have passed as a well-meaning, but somewhat clumsy work, with many faults of execution, but on the whole a useful contribution to popular information. But when he announces it as an original elucidation of an important period of modern history, the result of "rare opportunities of access to the necessary documents," and at the same time shows his ignorance of the German language, while professing his acquaintance with it, by stating that Schmidt's "*History of the Dutch*" (*Geschichte der Deutschen*) has been of material aid to him, we are bound to expose such pretensions, and are enabled to appreciate the meaning of his claim to "rare opportunities of access to the necessary documents," seeing that many of these documents exist only in the German tongue.

The publishers begin their advertisement with the bold statement that "this important and valuable, as well as attractive work, . . . has been received with almost unexampled favor by the press." And they support this assertion with commendatory extracts from eighteen notices from newspapers, and eleven from reviews. It would be surprising indeed if newspaper critics generally had sufficient knowledge to give any value to their judgments on the merits of a work such as this.

And it would not be worth while to attend to what they might say concerning it, were it not obvious that their opinions carry weight with some readers, or at least are supposed to carry weight, since otherwise it would hardly be for the interest of the publishers to reprint them. It seems certain then that their criticisms, however incompetent they may be, do harm.

The New York Examiner says: "The work of Mr. Gillett reminds us of the best historical writings of our times," — a vague phrase, indeed, but intended to convey the impression that the book has qualities similar to those of the works of Macaulay or Hallam, of Prescott or Bancroft. The Christian Intelligencer specifies so far as to say: "His description of Bohemia, prior to the advent of Huss, is a masterpiece, and reminds one of the very highest efforts of Bancroft in descriptive composition." In support of this statement we will quote a single sentence from the passage referred to, which will serve to show what appreciation the reviewer has of Bancroft's "highest efforts." In speaking of Charles IV. of Bohemia, Mr. Gillett says: "No one can trace his career of manifold activity, — using every art to extend and consolidate the empire, — discarding the sword and the warlike aims of his predecessors, but regaining by treaty and stratagem more than they had lost, — studiously avoiding all collision with the Papacy, yet adroitly grasping every advantage which its necessities afforded him, — and not perceive that under his liberal patronage the cause of learning and of letters would necessarily enter on a career of brighter prospects." (Vol. I. p. 13.) That is to say, No one can trace a *career* that discards the sword, that avoids collision, &c., without perceiving that the cause of learning would enter on a *career* of brighter prospects. If such writing as this reminds one of Mr. Bancroft's "highest efforts," it must be by the rule of contraries. Comparisons of this sort, easily made, but wholly without substantial foundation, are not surprising when met with in the columns of a newspaper, but they are in a high degree discreditable if found in a journal which professes to hold a high standard of scholarship, and which ought to be looked to with confidence for correct critical judgments. Thus when the Princeton Review declares that "the author of this work takes rank with Sparks, Bancroft, Irving, Prescott, Hopkins, and others," and when the Theological Eclectic speaks of the work as entitled "to be placed on the same level in the department of church history with that occupied by Bancroft and Prescott in secular history," it is evident that either the learned conductors of these reviews have an imperfect sense of the responsibility attaching to their office, or have adopted a convenient and meaningless phrase to save themselves from the trouble of conscientious examination and

criticism. We must admit, however, that all scholars are not judges of style, and that there may be perceptions so dull as to see no difference in merit between that of Mr. Gillett and of Mr. Bancroft or Mr. Prescott. But there is another quality of an historical work which is not a matter of opinion, but of evidence, and upon which if a critic undertakes to pass judgment, he gives the measure of his knowledge or his honesty, — that quality is its accuracy.

Thus the New York Methodist says: "The book has other merits besides those of historical accuracy and interest." The Independent says: "The author's researches are ample." The New York Evening Post declares: "He has given to the subject of the Bohemian reformation the careful examination of a conscientious student." The Literary Gazette characterizes the work as "a calm, patient, thorough, historical contribution." The Methodist Quarterly Review speaks of it as exhibiting "thorough research into original and contemporary sources." The Christian Examiner praises the author's "faithful and painstaking labor." Now all this commendation betrays only that the critics knew less than the author, and had not the honesty to say so. The book does give evidence of much labor, but not of "accuracy," not of "ample research," not of "the careful examination of the conscientious student," not of historical thoroughness or fidelity. These are questions of fact which are easily settled by reference to the book itself. How can an author who writes on the Bohemian reformation make "thorough research into original and contemporary sources" without a knowledge of either the German or the Bohemian language? Does it display "the careful examination" or "the painstaking of a conscientious student" to neglect the acquisition of these languages, a knowledge of which was essential to the fit performance of his task. But our chief business now is not with Mr. Gillett, but with his critics. They are primarily responsible for the production of such works. If Mr. Gillett had felt that his book would be exposed to careful, sincere, discriminating criticism, he would, it is probable, have tried to make it really worthy of praise; he would certainly have been less ready to publish so unscholarly a work. It would be far better that there were no criticism, rather than such misleading and ignorant parade of judgment.

It is time that a true, sound, learned critical spirit should show itself at least in those of our journals which are professedly literary and critical. The days in which we live are serious; they demand honesty of thought and life, honesty in literature and in manners; and if our critics and censors themselves be not honest, and care not for truth, and regard not simplicity, what is to be expected of those whom they influence by their writings?